**Preparation for phobic events (Fireworks and thunder)**

**Preparation:**

Preparation is all important if dogs are to get through fireworks or thunderstorms with minimum of fear and stress. First you need to make a special place where your dog can go to get away from the sounds he fears. Most dogs will already have a favourite room to go to; in which case all you need to do is to modify this place to make it even more suitable as a bolt-hole.

Some dogs do not know where to go to escape and, for these individuals, you need to create somewhere for them to hide. It is best to choose a room that is naturally quiet and those that are located toward the centre of the house and have minimal numbers of windows are the most suitable.

It is best to prepare the refuge as far ahead of the firework event as you can. Your dog must always be able to get to this place whenever he is frightened.

**Advance preparation: creating a refuge:**

* Install a Dog Appeasing Pheromone (ADAPTIL©) diffuser in the home, preferably close to or inside the dogs hiding place. The ADAPTIL© diffuser is a device that looks like an air freshener that you plug into a wall socket. It produces a smell that is like a chemical that your dog’s mother used to calm her puppies. ADAPTIL© diffusers are available from Queens Park Veterinary Surgery and should be left operating 24hrs a day. If possible, install the diffuser a couple of weeks before a known event, like fireworks, as this will produce a more powerful effect. ADAPTIL© makes dogs feel much more relaxed and confident when they might otherwise be stressed.
* Put in lots of blankets for your dog to dig and burrow in, preferably placed in a corner where the dog has already tended to dig or hide. Include an old, unwashed piece of clothing, like a woolly jumper, so that your dog can smell your scent and feel comforted by your indirect presence.
* Try to minimise the amount of noise entering the bolt hole room from outside. The dog must not see the flashes of fireworks or lightening, so close the windows and use heavy curtains to make the room dark.
* Bowls of food and water are essential and it is a good idea to make sure that your dog has emptied his bladder an hour or so before the storm or firework event starts.
* Leave a few special chews and things for your dog to eat in the hiding place in case he fancies something chewy to reduce his tension. However, do not be alarmed if he does not seem interested in them – some dogs are simply not interested in treats at a time like this.
* Moderately loud rhythmic music with a good beat is an effective way to mask the firework noises from outside, so put a hi-fi system in the room and keep the volume at a loud but comfortable level. However, every dog is an individual and if yours is not very partial to music at other times you should respect his personal taste!
* The designated hiding place must be accessible to your dog at all times and it is vital that you make sure that doors are fixed so that they cannot accidentally shut and trap the pet inside or out of the room.
* Get your dog used to going to the hiding place 2 to 3 times each day during the run up to a firework display by taking him there and giving him some food or a favourite chew. This will help the dog to understand that this is a good place to go.
* If you know that a firework display is due on a particular evening, then give your dog a large, stodgy, carbohydrate-rich meal in the late afternoon of that day. Pasta, mashed potato or overcooked rice are ideal and will help to make your dog feel calm and sleepy as the night draws in.
* Make sure your pet is kept in a safe and secure environment at all times so that he doesn’t bolt and escape if a sudden noise occurs. Keep your dog on a leash in public places and make sure that gates, fences and doors are secure.

If your vet has given you medication to reduce your dog’s fears, make sure you follow the prescription precisely.

**When the noise starts:**

* As soon as the fireworks display starts, lead your dog to the hiding place and encourage him to stay there.
* Do not get cross with your dog when he is scared as it will only make him more frightened.
* It is tempting to try to soothe your dog to relieve his fears but this is the worst thing to do. It gives your dog the impression that there is something to be frightened of and may even reward him for being scared. Also, if your dog comes to think of you as the only person who can soothe his fears, he may panic if there are fireworks when you are not around to help.
* Ignore your dog when he is looking frightened and only show attention and affection when he has begun to relax. Then you can give your dog a game and some food treats as a reward.
* It is a good idea to try to keep your dog in a happy mood by playing lots of games and doing little bits of training using food rewards. This will stop him from falling into a state of anxious tension, but do not expect too much.
* Ignore the noises yourself and try to appear happy and relaxed. If your pet is only mildly fearful, you could try to engage him in some form of active game. Try to appear happy and unconcerned. It can help if you play a game with another pet in the household because the frightened one may be tempted to join in.
* If your pet is very frightened by the noises and cannot be encouraged to play, then lead him to the refuge you have created.

Lastly, having got through fireworks this year, you need to start to do something about your dog’s phobia problems. Many dogs can be treated using behavioural methods called desensitisation and counterconditioning. Specially made recordings of fireworks can be used to train dogs not to react to the noises they fear. CD’s of fireworks, thunder and other noises are sold under brand name ‘Sounds Scary’ and are available through your vet.

*Taken from ‘Behaviour Problems in Small Animals’ by Jon Bowen and Sarah Heath*